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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses second language learning strategies--specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students used to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the second language. The first section discusses characteristics of good language learners. The second section highlights research findings that suggest successful language learners often use strategies in an orchestrated fashion. In the third section, factors that influence the choice of second language learning strategies (i.e., motivation, gender, learning style) are listed. Subsequent sections address teaching students to use second language learning strategies), the problems in trying to classify second language learning strategies, and implications for further research. Contains 16 references. (VWL)

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Language Learning Strategies: An Update

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CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS
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Language Learning Strategies: An Update

(EDO-FL-02-95)

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Foreign or second language (L2) learning strategies are specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use—often consciously—to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the L2 (Oxford, 1990b). For example, Lázló seeks out conversation partners. Oke groups words to be learned and then labels each group. Ahmed uses gestures to communicate in the classroom when the words do not come to mind. Mai Qi learns words by breaking them down into their components. Young consciously uses guessing when she reads. Strategies are the tools for active, self-directed involvement needed for developing L2 communicative ability (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Research has repeatedly shown that the conscious, tailored use of such strategies is related to language achievement and proficiency.

Good Language Learners

Early researchers tended to make lists of strategies and other features presumed to be essential for all "good L2 learners." Rubin (1975) suggested that good L2 learners are willing and accurate guessers; have a strong drive to communicate; are often uninhibited; are willing to make mistakes; focus on form by looking for patterns and analyzing; take advantage of all practice opportunities; monitor their speech as well as that of others; and pay attention to meaning.

A number of these characteristics have been validated by subsequent research. However, the "uninhibited" aspect has not been confirmed as part of all or most good language learners. Because of language anxiety, many potentially excellent L2 learners are naturally inhibited; they combat inhibition by using positive self-talk, by extensive use of practicing in private, and by putting themselves in situations where they have to participate communicatively.

Naiman, Frohlich, and Todesco (1975) made a list of strategies used by successful L2 learners, adding that they learn to think in the language and address the affective aspects of language acquisition. For additional lists of strategies used by good language learners, see Ramirez (1986) and Reiss (1985).

Effectiveness and Orchestration of L2 Learning Strategies

Research supports the effectiveness of using L2 learning strategies and has shown that successful language learners often use strategies in an orchestrated fashion. Some findings are listed below:

- Use of appropriate language learning strategies often results in improved proficiency or achievement overall or in specific skill areas (Oxford et al., 1993; Thompson & Rubin, 1993).
- Successful language learners tend to select strategies that work well together in a highly orchestrated way, tailored to the requirements of the language task (Chamot & Kupper, 1989). These learners can easily explain the strategies they use and why they employ them (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).
- Cognitive (e.g., translating, analyzing) and metacognitive (e.g., planning, organizing) strategies are often used together, supporting each other (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Well tailored combinations of strategies often have more impact than single strategies.
- Certain strategies or clusters of strategies are linked to particular language skills or tasks. For example, L2 writing, like L1 writing, benefits from the learning strategies of planning, self-monitoring, deduction, and substitution. L2 speaking demands strategies such as risk-taking, paraphrasing, circumlocution, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation. L2 listening comprehension gains from strategies of elaboration, inferencing, selective attention, and self-monitoring, while reading comprehension uses strategies like reading aloud, guessing, deduction, and summarizing (Chamot & Kupper, 1989). See Oxford (1990b) for a detailed chart that maps relevant strategies with listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.
- The powerful social and affective strategies are found less often in L2 research. This is, perhaps, because these behaviors are not studied frequently by L2 researchers, and because learners are not familiar with paying attention to their own feelings and social relationships as part of the L2 learning process (Oxford, 1990b).

Factors Influencing the Choice of L2 Learning Strategies

Oxford (1990a) synthesized existing research on how the following factors influence the choice of strategies used among students learning a second language.

Motivation. More motivated students tended to use more strategies than less motivated students, and the particular reason for studying the language (motivational orientation, especially as related to career field) was important in the choice of strategies.

Gender. Females reported greater overall strategy use than males in many studies (although sometimes males surpassed females in the use of a particular strategy).

Cultural background. Rote memorization and other forms of memorization were more prevalent among some Asian students than among students from other cultural backgrounds. Certain other cultures also appeared to encourage this strategy among learners.

Attitudes and beliefs. These were reported to have a profound effect on the strategies learners choose, with negative attitudes and beliefs often causing poor strategy use or lack of orchestration of strategies.

Type of task. The nature of the task helped determine the strategies naturally employed to carry out the task.

Age and L2 stage. Students of different ages and stages of L2 learning used different strategies, with certain strategies often being employed by older or more advanced students.

Learning style. Learning style (general approach to language learning) often determined the choice of L2 learning strategies. For example, analytic-style students preferred strategies such as contrastive analysis, rule-learning, and dissecting words and phrases,

while global students used strategies to find meaning (guessing, scanning, predicting) and to converse without knowing all the words (paraphrasing, gesturing).

Tolerance of ambiguity. Students who were more tolerant of ambiguity used significantly different learning strategies in some instances than did students who were less tolerant of ambiguity.

L2 Strategy Training

Considerable research has been conducted on how to improve L2 students' learning strategies. In many investigations, attempts to teach students to use learning strategies (called strategy training or learner training) have produced good results (Thompson & Rubin, 1993). However, not all L2 strategy training studies have been successful or conclusive. Some training has been effective in various skill areas but not in others, even within the same study. (For details of studies, see Oxford & Crookall, 1989.)

Based on L2 strategy training research, the following principles have been tentatively suggested, subject to further investigation:

- L2 strategy training should be based clearly on students' attitudes, beliefs, and stated needs.
- Strategies should be chosen so that they mesh with and support each other and so that they fit the requirements of the language task, the learners' goals, and the learners' style of learning.
- Training should, if possible, be integrated into regular L2 activities over a long period of time rather than taught as a separate, short intervention.
- Students should have plenty of opportunities for strategy training during language classes.
- Strategy training should include explanations, handouts, activities, brainstorming, and materials for reference and home study.
- Affective issues such as anxiety, motivation, beliefs, and interests–all of which influence strategy choice—should be directly addressed by L2 strategy training.
- Strategy training should be explicit, overt, and relevant and should provide plenty of practice with varied L2 tasks involving authentic materials.
- Strategy training should not be solely tied to the class at hand; it should provide strategies that are transferable to future language tasks beyond a given class.
- Strategy training should be somewhat individualized, as different students prefer or need certain strategies for particular tasks.
- Strategy training should provide students with a mechanism to evaluate their own progress and to evaluate the success of the training and the value of the strategies in multiple tasks.

Problems in Classifying Strategies

Almost two dozen L2 strategy classification systems have been divided into the following groups: (1) systems related to successful language learners (Rubin, 1975); (2) systems based on psychological functions (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990); (3) linguistically based systems dealing with guessing, language monitoring, formal and functional practice (Bialystok, 1981) or with communication strategies like paraphrasing or borrowing (Tarone, 1983); (4) systems related to separate language skills (Cohen, 1990); and (5) systems based on different styles or types of learners (Sutter, 1989). The existence of these distinct strategy typologies indicates a major problem in the research area of L2 learning strategies: lack of a coherent, well accepted system for describing these strategies.

Implications

Researchers must reconceptualize L2 learning strategies to include the social and affective sides of learning along with the more intellectual sides. The L2 learner is not just a cognitive and metacognitive machine but, rather, a whole person. In strategy training, teachers should help students develop affective and social strategies, as well as intellectually related strategies, based on their individual learning styles, current strategy use, and specific goals.

Research should be replicated so more consistent information becomes available within and across groups of learners. Particularly important is information on how students from different cultural backgrounds use language learning strategies. L2 teachers need to feel confident that the research is applicable to their students.

More research on factors affecting strategy choice would be helpful. Learning style is an important factor, along with gender, age, nationality or ethnicity, beliefs, previous educational and cultural experiences, and learning goals. Additionally, it is likely that different kinds of learners (e.g., analytic vs. global or visual vs. auditory) might benefit from different modes of strategy training.

Teachers must have training relevant to their own instructional situations in three areas: identifying students' current learning strategies through surveys, interviews, or other means; helping individual students discern which strategies are most relevant to their learning styles, tasks, and goals; and aiding students in developing orchestrated strategy use rather than a scattered approach.

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